

SOUND INSTALLATION IN SPAIN
SOUND, FORM AND SPACE



I MUESTRA DE ARTE SONORO ESPAÑOL

SENSXPERIMENT 06

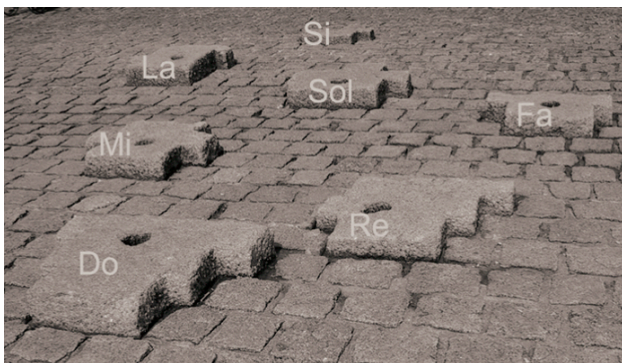
SOUND INSTALLATION IN SPAIN
SOUND, FORM AND SPACE
by Mikel Arce

When we talk or theorize about the multiple forms of representation of our current visual discourses, it is becoming increasingly necessary to reserve a reasonably sized space for the many forms in which the sonic, sound, becomes the main axis and drive behind that which is being represented.

Leaving aside (but not behind) its manifestations and adjectived musical forms, as well as those of an obvious audiovisual character, sound has progressively become an increasingly frequent feature in all or virtually all the facets of Contemporary Art.

When it is linked to other ways of representation or serves as a vehicle for them we talk about or refer to them as sound installations, sound sculptures or sound objects; sound is thus embodied in the piece and directs it. In the piece, the approach or sonic proposal may take on elements and partake of traditional and modern visual art discourses so that they become incorporated in the resultant work. In these manifestations sound is consciously materialized; that is to say, it is incorporated to the work that produces it or “sounds”.

The presence of sound, or the reference to sonic elements in any of its possible manifestations, throughout the history of Spanish Contemporary Art, and already focusing ourselves on what we call “Sound Installations/Sculptures”, is not an isolated occurrence, nor an expressive means exclusive to artists restricted to the appropriately named “Sound Art”: I will give as an example the sculptural installation-intervention “El peine de los vientos” [the wind’s comb, N.T.] by Eduardo Chillida, in which this artist creates a very coherent intervention in the visual as well as “sonic” landscape of a very definite place in San Sebastian. In that place he didn’t just create and develop a new visual and sculptural environment, absolutely in keeping with the landscape of sea, rocks and woodland surrounding it, but rather -being fully aware of its sonic reality (waves breaking upon the rocks)-, he proposed and developed, together with contemporary musician Luis de Pablo, seven perforations perfectly situated and marked on the surface of the platform. Chillida’s intention was to somehow “urbanize”, intervene and/or direct the sound that already existed in that place, channelling and organizing it. Thus, he was at the same creating a piece that today would be considered as belonging to what is usually known as “sound landscape”.



The sea, according to the strength and energy with which it enters the subsoil of the comb, will produce a pressure on the air that, as it is released through each of the seven orifices, will cause the sea and the air pressed by the waves to make sounds corresponding to the

seven notes in the scale as it gets out. (Or, at least, that is what happens and can be ascertained if we record –as I have personally done- the sound produced by each of the seven orifices and reproduce them in the corresponding order: they will produce analogous sounds to those of the traditional musical scale). Commonly, we only hear the sum of all seven sounds produced simultaneously, the only variation being that of the intensity of the whole in connection to the sea state.

LUGAN

Changing the focus towards sound installation under a stricter perspective, more in keeping with avant-garde art standpoints, we simply must make reference, inasmuch as something created in Spain, and as a pioneer of a way of understanding sound beyond its customary and constricted forms of creation and diffusion, to our great artist Lugan, acronym of Luis García Núñez (Madrid, 1929), electronic technician by trade, who began (as so many other artists whose work finally led to Sound Art) by painting, figuratively in its early stages, at a latter phase developing towards the abstract, and continuing during the 60s with the research on the relationship between the visual and the electronic, which finally translated into audiovisual/tactile and multi-sensorial works.

In the work of Lugan a constant feature appears: the integration of various arts, the creation of synergies: that is to say, mediums that are added to and complement other mediums, thus accommodating elements traditionally considered as non-artistic in his works and encouraging spectators to use several senses (hear-touch-smell) to verify, observe and conclude the work.

Thanks to his technological knowledge of the electronics of those days, Lugan found a domain that had so far hardly been explored by visual artists, conceiving works that are interactive, calculated, detailed and related to the space containing them.

Lugan was a pioneer, inasmuch as he conceived art as something with increasingly less limits, devoid of boundaries, far freer and more advanced than could be conceived, let alone understood, in those days and in Franco's Spain; an art of the senses in which the spectator would also become the protagonist of the work, the one who completed it.



Lugan: Bosque de mensajes

His experimental bent and eagerness to participate in new research projects on the elaboration of artistic products, led Lugan to become involved in the Visual Forms Automatic Generation Seminar, created by Ernesto García Camarero on December 1968 at the Computation Centre of Universidad Complutense, Madrid, where he realized the

work “Scrap Computer Sensitive to Human Touch”, which he presented at the Computable Forms exhibition, which opened on June 25 1969 at the above mentioned centre. In contrast to the remaining participants involved in the Madrid’s experience, the distinctive and unique feature of Lugan’s work consisted in the fact that instead of concerning himself with software and the elaboration of products by developing a program, he focused his attention on the machine’s hardware, that is, in its different body parts and electronic components in order to create the work, as mentioned, by means of electronic debris and scrap parts.

The Dadaist and ironical character of some of Lugan’s works is evident in such pieces as “Random telephones”, performed at the Pamplona Encounters held on June 1972, in which Lugan carried out one of his most daring interventions and installations. On the one hand, a hundred telephones distributed along different spots throughout the city allowed, by means of a complex networked system -which wiring was possible thanks to the collaboration of Telefónica-, the members of the public to freely communicate while, on the other hand, ten phone boxes with telephones connected not only to the various activities of the Encounters, but also to bars, schools, repair shops and even a brothel were set up. Another such example can be found in his piece “Convergent Listening” (1989), an homage to Lily Greenham, an artist closely connected since the late 50s to various fields of contemporary artistic creation (music, happening, concrete poetry, abstract painting). The piece consists in a telephone through which visitors can listen to a recital of concrete poetry in English by Lily Greenham.

CONCHA JEREZ- JOSÉ IGES

This tandem of artists, formed in the late 80s, has developed an intense activity and a vast production in the domain of Sound Installation ever since. Iges’ concern with the

development of works along spatial and specifically visual lines and Jerez’s inclination towards the realm of sound led them to produce joint works in parallel to their individual trajectories, a collaboration based on the solid musical background of both and the extensive trajectory of Concha Jerez in the realm of Conceptual Art. The influences exerted by Fluxus movement, through the figure of its representative in Spain, Wolf Vostel, and by grupo ZAJ, especially through Juan Hidalgo and Esther Ferrer, as well as by the approach of Isidoro Valcárcel Medina, are evident. The vast and prolonged work of this two artists puts forward contents and concepts that can be analyzed from different angles: from the sum total of all the elements featured, from the interferences that these (sonic-visual-symbolic) aspects create between them, or from the sheer aesthetics of the work, always extremely meticulous.

On occasion, they have also directed their work towards themes related to control and electronic surveillance, as in the interactive installation “Polyphemus’ Eye” presented in the 1997 Ars Electronica Festival. In “Polyphemus’ Eye”, that scrutinizing eye became a peephole by which spectators became “voyeurs”. Concurrently, a camera recorded their movements and transferred them to a monitor which in turn was what they were really observing. Another camera permanently streamed images through the Internet of what was taking place there, thus implementing that telematic control. It was also possible to participate on an online discussion forum about the issue. On an independent large screen, footage taken by surveillance cameras in different European cities and mixed with images of the very spectators in attendance were displayed; the people attending had access to operating the cameras or recording the conversations that were taking place in the first space.



Concha Jerez: Jardín de palabras escritas 7.

In “Net-Opera” (a project also developed for the web) a course through some of Jerez/Iges’ central concerns unfolds. Image clusters of ruins, population displacement, war, etc., taken from daily news and fading ghost-like into those other images of superficiality, luxury, excess, which quite casually coexist with the former ones, are presented much in the same manner in which they daily appear. The idea of mixing fragments from various realities went on to assume a new dimension, for the spectator himself was able to interact at the exhibitory space with those endless layers or representations of the real by means of a series of sensors.

“Persona” is the latest intermedia installation by Concha Jerez and José Iges. A work that dwells on the paradoxical relationships between identity, personality and appearance and in which interactivity and audience participation play an essential role.

In this exhibition, visual and sonic elements, enhanced by means of digital and interactive technologies bring about and create paradoxical impressions: hidden cameras and secret sensors, equivocal mirrors, elusive music and sounds and a constant flow of that which is most inapprehensible and essential to life: water.

Video and photograph projections, as well as a subtle interactive system of lighting and sound transforms the rigid structure of an architectural space into a sensitive, permeable and shifting membrane which responds to the movement of visitors.

The intervention or adaptation of the installation space to the actual installation is yet another constant feature of the Sound Installations by Jerez/Iges, as in fact is the case of this work or of “Jardín de Palabras” [Garden of Words] by Concha Jerez, their forms being adapted and changed according to the spaces where they are displayed, be them the Koldo Mitxelena, (San Sebastian), Círculo de Bellas Artes (Madrid) or Fundación Antonio Gala (Córdoba), etc.

JOSE ANTONIO ORTS

Having studied musical composition with Amando Blanquer, Luciano Berio, Iannis Xenakis and Yoshihisa Taïra, J.A. Orts won a grant to go to Paris and Rome where he progressively discovered the artistic possibilities of a project which connected music to visual arts, thus creating sculptures that blended music and light by means of electronic circuitry. J.A. Orts' installations may be considered interactive sculptures, sensitive to light changes and air displacements produced by audiences as they visit them, thus causing variations of light and sound.

In his own words:

"In my work I generally try to create pieces which aren't exclusively inert elements, that is to say, I strive to produce "living" pieces. This is why I endeavour to make sensitive pieces that capture the energy of spectators. The central idea is that the best way for a piece to be endowed with "life" is by causing it to take that life from the very spectator contemplating it or, in some cases, from the surrounding nature.



José Antonio Orts: Fábrica de Melodías

The form of the pieces always stems from their function and consequently there is an essential bond between visual form and effect produced. The distribution of the installation elements within the space is carried out by simultaneously bearing in mind visual, sonic and lighting criteria: the first, derived from the visual character of the object and from the architecture of the space; the second, coming from the musical composition and the relationship between work and spectator. The electronic materials aren't merely used due to their function (electronic) but also because they constitute the standard visual materials for the piece.

The installations are designed so as to allow visitors to enter and wander about them. On doing so, the works are inhabited by visitors who become an essential part of them, for they enliven, humanize and complete them.

JUAN ANTONIO LLEÓ

He stands for a new generation of sound artists, possibly more closely related to the latest artistic trends and new electronic and information technologies, areas in which the interaction with the spectator and generation of images and sounds are achieved thanks to routines and programs designed and created to that end.

Midiverso is one of the installations that best represents the work of Juan Antonio Lleó: The ancients believed that the harmonious movement of stars and planets generated a certain kind of sound, known as the music of the spheres, which was audible only by experiencing a certain kind of elevation. From such a suggestive groundwork Midiverso goes on to propose an interactive multimedia system in which the representation of several celestial bodies on a semisphere, some of which have sequences and algorithms assigned to them according to different criteria, function as MIDI-controlled note and light generators within some sort of mobile score. As they press the buttons, visitors progressively discover or modify the various aspects of the acoustic landscape, thus becoming composers-interpreters-listeners of sound passages of quite a unique character. The way these buttons are arranged allows several visitors to operate simultaneously on the system. A series of images, organized in scenes that follow one another in random sequence and in turn relate to the sound backgrounds, are projected by means of a multimedia application. One of the main features of the images is that they have been subjected to various infographic reprocessing techniques, their source being both scanned images or photographs and original artwork created with image generation programs (3D, fractals...)

The video fragments are produced through the generation of animated 3D images, which are later processed by means of video editing digital applications. Transitions are implemented in a slow manner, more akin to contemplation than action, the result likely to be considered as some sort of animated painting. In turn, the device triggers MIDI files that are added to the interactively generated notes, which causes both systems (image and sound generation) to be intimately connected. An eight-channel amplifier system, through which the spatial dimension acquires great significance, completes the installation.



Juan Antonio Lleo: Midiverso

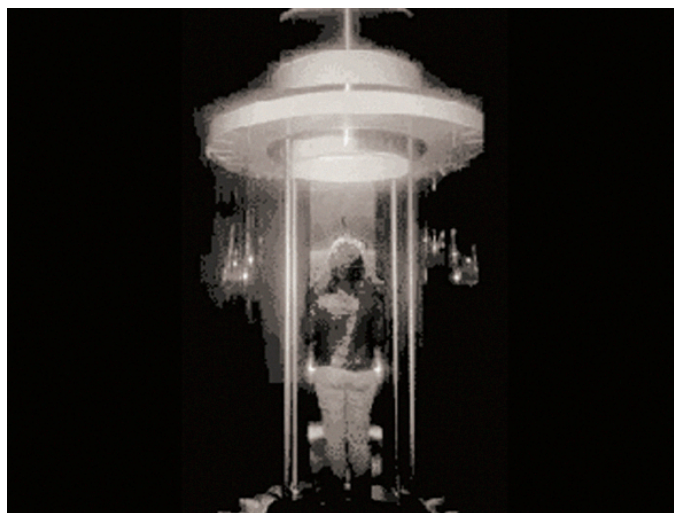
ADOLFO NÚÑEZ

Adolfo Núñez has taken degrees on Composition, Guitar and Industrial Ingeneering. His work encompasses symphonic, electroacoustic and computer generated music, as well as pieces for film, radio and sound installations. Among the prizes he has won are the Polifonía 1982 (Cuenca), Paul & Hanna (Standford 1986, US), Bourges 1994 (France), Musica Nova'95 (Czech Republic), or Neuen Akademie Braunschweig 1996 (Germany). He lectures and writes in several publications on a regular basis about science and the application of new technologies to music. He authored the book "Informática y Electrónica Musical" [IT and Music Electronics, N.T.].

His latest activities include the sound installation "Oracle", created together with visual artist Carlos Urbina. In that piece, visitors could ask questions which received a text or a musical fragment as an answer. Responses were randomly chosen by means of a computer program and appeared in the form of a text or a musical fragment. As with every oracle or soothsaying practice, the answers virtually always have an ambiguous character and it is the very person asking the question, according to his innermost desires, who finds that which is relevant to him, who interprets the answer and, although possibly unaware of it or unwilling to do so, programmes his own future.



Jaume Plensa: Wispern



Adolfo Nuñez: Oráculo

JAUME PLENSA

Jaume Plensa (Barcelona, 1955) is nowadays one of the most outstanding sculptors both on a national and international panorama, and I think it timely to mention him alongside those artists who work with sound, -as well as with form and space, as he is currently creating incredibly beautiful sculptural installations which we also consider to have a sonic dimension.

He studied at the Llotja and at Sant Jordi's high school of Fine Arts and he mastered the techniques of sculpture while working in a mechanics repair workshop. In his most recent work he makes a cunning use of speech, thus imbuing it with great attractiveness and dynamism. In the works by Plensa, sound, silence and light occupy a prominent place. Wispern (whisper) 1998, provides an example: an immense project created by means of engraved cymbals on which drops of water progressively fall, producing a murmuring sound as they slide down. It is a work intended to be contemplated, listened to, meditated

upon. "The waves of the submerged cymbal are also stony", the resonant expansion of water and sound reaches the module of time, the figure of age, the bridge of identification: "I am not so interested in the use of weight, measure and number to define a space, as in obtaining energy. The drops produce various sounds, because the Proverbs of Hell by William Blake, which are engraved on the cymbals, have their specific weight". Thus, the inscription of words, as it alters the physical properties of the object, causes the arising of energy, of a sound in this case, different in each instance, much as each proverb is expressed differently".

J.M. BERENGUER

The work of José Manuel Berenguer, a musician and multimedia artist, manifests itself through countless pieces, actions and installations that arise from the use of various multimedia tools and his interest in given aspects of human knowledge.

Since his first work saw the light of day in 1987, Berenguer has developed or participated in innumerable projects. In an interview given to a magazine –Mosaic no. 42-, on September 9, 2005, he defines his work thus:

"I dedicate my time to many activities, all of which are related, to a greater or lesser extent, to the artistic use of sound. Some of them have a contemplative character, whereas others relate to cultural agitation.

Among the first ones are what is traditionally known as musical and artistic works: musical pieces on a standard support, musical works that produce the stream of sounds in real time and/or interact with an interpreter, audiovisual pieces that generate the flux of sounds and images in real time according to a given algorithm, audiovisual pieces that interact with the user's gestures through sensors and interfaces, multimedia and interactive installations, sculptures, etc.

Usually these works are the result of contemplating themes connected to Philosophy, History of Knowledge, the limits of language, Life and Artificial Intelligence, Robotics, the Social Metabolism of Information and a great number of other concerns that would be awkward to quote here in full. Mega kai Mikron, for instance, is an installation that I created at Metrònom with the participation of the CSIC's National Centre for Microelectronics, its central contention being the infinite. In "lambda-itter", and audio-visual performance for flute and two laptops that I have developed with flutist Jane Rigler, the main theme was the idea of flux.



J. M. Berenguer: Transfer

Among those activities dealing with cultural agitation, I would like to mention the ones that I undertake in the Orquesta del Caos and together with Còclea, namely, the co-direction of Sonoscop, -an archive of sound art-, Zeppelin, -a festival of sound projects-, and Música13. These are programming activities that emerge in response to needs of a theoretical nature.

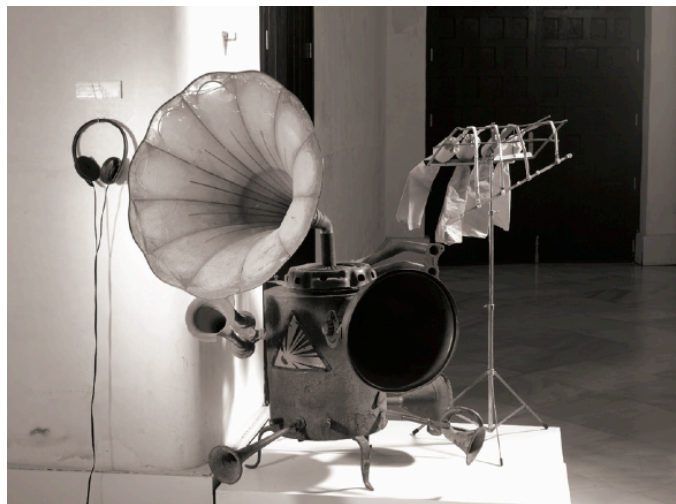
MIGUEL MOLINA ALARCÓN

Sound and Intermedia artist, professor of the Sculpture Department at the Polytechnic University of Valencia, Miguel Molina also directs the research group Laboratorio de Creaciones Intermedia (LCI) at the UPV, where intermedia workshops, exhibitions and research projects are organized. Their last project consisted in the restoration of artistic sound works from the historical avant-garde (1909-1945): Futurism, Dada, Cubo-Futurism, Bauhaus, Activism, Ultraism, Stridentism, Postism, etc.

He has curated exhibitions in Valencia, Alicante, Guipúzcoa, La Rioja, ... as well as in France, Brazil and Germany.



Miguel Molina:
Virtual Bank Cajero Confesionario 24h



Miguel Molina: Mascletá Virtual

“Artistic works have been proposed from an interdisciplinary methodology susceptible of being used in the current historical and social status quo we find ourselves in. Hence the simultaneous use of old and new image media together with alternative spaces and channels for the communication of creative works. In contrast to ancient art as a regulator of nature’s hidden powers, in this day and age the challenge lies in facing the hidden power of economy”.

M. Molina.

As we can see, the work of Miguel Molina unfolds in the fields of intervention, sonic construction and reconstruction as well as that of research.

Among his sound works we find the following: “Political Show”, “Mascletá Virtual”, “15 Españoles en la Habana”, “Altavoz del Frente”, “Del mono Azul al Cuello Blanco: Sonidos de la Era Industrial”, “Ruidos y Susurros de las Vanguardias” and “Cajero-Confesionario 24h” (Sound Installation)

MIKEL ARCE SAGARDUY

Lastly, I will mention myself in this brief itinerary, out of which several artists will no doubt have been left out, as well as former and current students at the Fine Arts faculties of the Universidad de Castilla la Mancha (Cuenca), the Politécnica de Valencia and the Universidad del País Vasco, where thanks to the efforts of such teachers as José Antonio Sarmiento, Miguel Molina Alarcón or my own, a great number of works and sound installations have been developed and materialized during the last years.

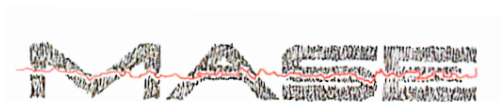
The sound installations that I have created in the last five years have somehow attempted to materialize sound, to create spaces where it is possible to test the relief and three-dimensional character of sound. That is the case of Diapasones 2.5, where independent sounds, distributed in an “L” shape throughout the space by means of a multiphonic projection of eight independent channels, allowed spectators to have the opportunity to sample the spatial three-dimensionality of sound through a minimalist composition created with the sound of 4 “otto” clinical diapasons.

In .*WAV, perhaps my best known and most diffused work, I attempted to shape and verify the physical quality of sound: the water contained in four trays presents the forms and images of sound by means of a composition based on four frequencies, four very deep and hardly audible wave forms that are progressively reproduced and shifted through four loudspeakers that support the trays.

In “A Bruit de Souffle” I also look for new sonic forms, new ways of contemplating sound, in this case by means of the artificial fog generated by two ultrasound injectors that vibrate immersed in two containers filled with water, and modulated by two loudspeakers suspended over this fog, playing a composition based on two breathings.



Mikel Arce: .*WAV



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